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ABSTRACT

An educational advocate and parent of a hearing impaired child discusses her role. She cites the need for advocacy and briefly mentions problems with due process cases in Pennsylvania. She lists techniques for individual advocacy (such as an advocacy record of parent-school negotiations and school records) as well as for systemwide advocacy (including use of media to inform the public and litigation). (CL)

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WHO WILL SPEAK FOR THE CHILDREN?

I am an educational advocate-both professionally, and as a volunteer. I am also a wife, a teacher, a sometime housewife, and the mother of 2 children, a hamster and an elderly German Schnauser.

A question I am often asked is "How did you become an advocate?" another is "What does an advocate do"? Today I would like to share the "why" and the "how" of my advocacy, with you. Multiply my experiences by the thousands and you will understand where many of us are coming from and how our activities are becoming unified.

Our son, Erich, suffered a respiratory collapse at birth which left him with a severe hearing loss.

During his early years my time was pretty well taken up with learning how to help him at home and finding professionals to help him away from home. We were fortunate in finding many professionals who went the extra mile with him. I will always be grateful to them.

During those early years, contacts with other parents of deaf children were minimal and treasured. Alexander Graham Bell Association literature was a source of learning and hope for his future.

As he gradually made his successful way through progressively "less restrictive" educational placements, I managed to make time to work with a parent group as a member, then an officer and the "person who worked with everyone when they had a problem."

When Erich was 9 years old and made the change from a private school for the Deaf to an Intermediate Unit operated program, I realized that I had become a volunteer advocate, It was at this time that P.L.94-142 was passed. That was five years ago.

For many exceptional children, The Education for all Handicapped Act has been purely a miracle. For some, the law's implementation by states has been a disaster. Individual school districts through genuine ignorance or deliberate intent do not always comply with the law. Many states, ours included, seem far from meeting the law's promises.

The groups which had worked so well together to put this great law into effect have largely dispersed, leaving it to the state departments of education to implement it.

When there is a clear danger to children's educational needs someone must "speak for the children". Many parents are strong enough and informed enough to speak for their children's rights themselves. For the children whose parents cannot or will not speak for them there is a great need for advocates.

As a volunteer member of Alexander Graham Bell Association's "Children's Rights" Committee, I speak for the Hearing-Impaired children in Western Pennsylvania. I am proud of the way the Bell Association has made a national committment to protecting the right of hearing - impaired children to an education appropriate to their needs.

As a full-time Educational Advocate for the Pittsburgh Chapter of the Association for Retarded Citizens, I speak primarily for mentally retarded students. However, my agency encourages my helping any handicapped child or any group which is working for the benefit of handicapped children. This too, is a source of pride to me.

I have no desire to be a "Joan of Arc", we all know what happened to her! I try to gather enough information to be sure a student needs my services, and then I "walk through" the problem with the parent. This requires a fair amount of preparation. Once school districts and teachers I work with know that I am only interested in securing what is best for the student, we can usually work as partners with the parent. Sometimes we do become adversaries and this I regret, but I can live with it. Many of my present cases have come to me through teachers and school districts with whom I have worked before.

My most adversarial situation comes when I deal with a school system which is really resistant to change and I have found many system problems while dealing with the needs of an individual student. One such problem I have identified through individual cases is that of Pennsylvania Due Process Hearings.

In my opinion, our state must soon address the havoc which our due process hearings frequently cause. They are too often expensive, agonizing win-lose situations in which the child is frequently the loser, along with his or her parents. I would like to see those hearings become the informal, impartial conferences they were intended to be. In the meantime, I intend to go on fighting case by case,for the children cannot wait while we try to find a better way. This is one system problem which will need the effort of many advocates and probably will ultimately be solved by litagation in Federal Court.

SOME "TOOLS" WHICH SHOULD BE USED FOR "INDIVIDUAL" ADVOCACY ARE:

1. The parent's description of her concern.
2. An "advocacy record" which is compiled through talking with the parent and the school, and reviewing the students records.
3. Observation of the student in class and at home, if needed.
4. Education of the parent as we go through the problem.
5. Negotiations with the school system-by phone calls, letters and meetings.
6. If all else fails (and only as a last resort), due process hearings.

SOME "TOOLS WHICH SHOULD BE USED FOR "SYSTEM" ADVOCACY ARE:

1. Identification of the concern.
2. Research to find options for correcting the problem.
3. Work with parent groups, agencies and anyone sharing the same concern. Education of parents individually and in groups.
4. Negotiations through local, state and Federal administrations through use of phone calls, letters and meetings and complaint procedures.
5. Contact with legislators.
6. Use of media to inform the public.
7. Litagation.

Use of all these steps requires constant review of the laws we now have.

If you are a parent, please try to inform yourself of your child's needs and rights. You are the best expert where he's concerned. You have the new laws; use them! And try to make time in your life to help another parent.

If you are an educator, please try to look upon parents and parent advocates as partners in educating the student. Encourage parents to participate in their child's education. There is such great joy in seeing a student begin to meet success when he had previously met failure. And we can share this joy together, for we are really partners in educational advocacy.

I have with me some examples of material which I use in helping and/or educating parents.

Your own group is the source of some of my favorite information packets. An example is this old friend "The Identification, Evaluation and Placement Process". If you are interested in examining any of these, please see me after the meeting. I have a few to give out and I can give you addresses for the rest.

For now, I would be glad to try to answer any questions you may have.

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